

**Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact**

**South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management  
Environmental Assessment (EA)**

**USDA Forest Service  
Trabuco Ranger District, Cleveland National Forest  
Riverside and Orange Counties, California**

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**1. Background**

As described in the South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management EA in greater detail, The Trabuco Ranger District, Cleveland National Forest, has been managing hazardous fuels within or adjacent to the proposed project area over the last three decades. The South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management Project (SMDGEC) has been designed to incorporate these previously managed hazardous fuels reduction projects, e.g. South Main Divide, North Main Divide, Old Dominion, and Hixon Fuelbreaks; in conjunction with proposed new roadside fuelbreaks and community defense zones that would create a continual zone of managed vegetation to improve firefighter and public safety while increasing the efficacy of wildland fire suppression tactics. Project area locations and associated treatments would be designed to meet Land Management Plan (LMP) goals and standards through employing program strategies and tactics found in Appendix B of Part 2 of the LMP (USDA Forest Service, 2005).

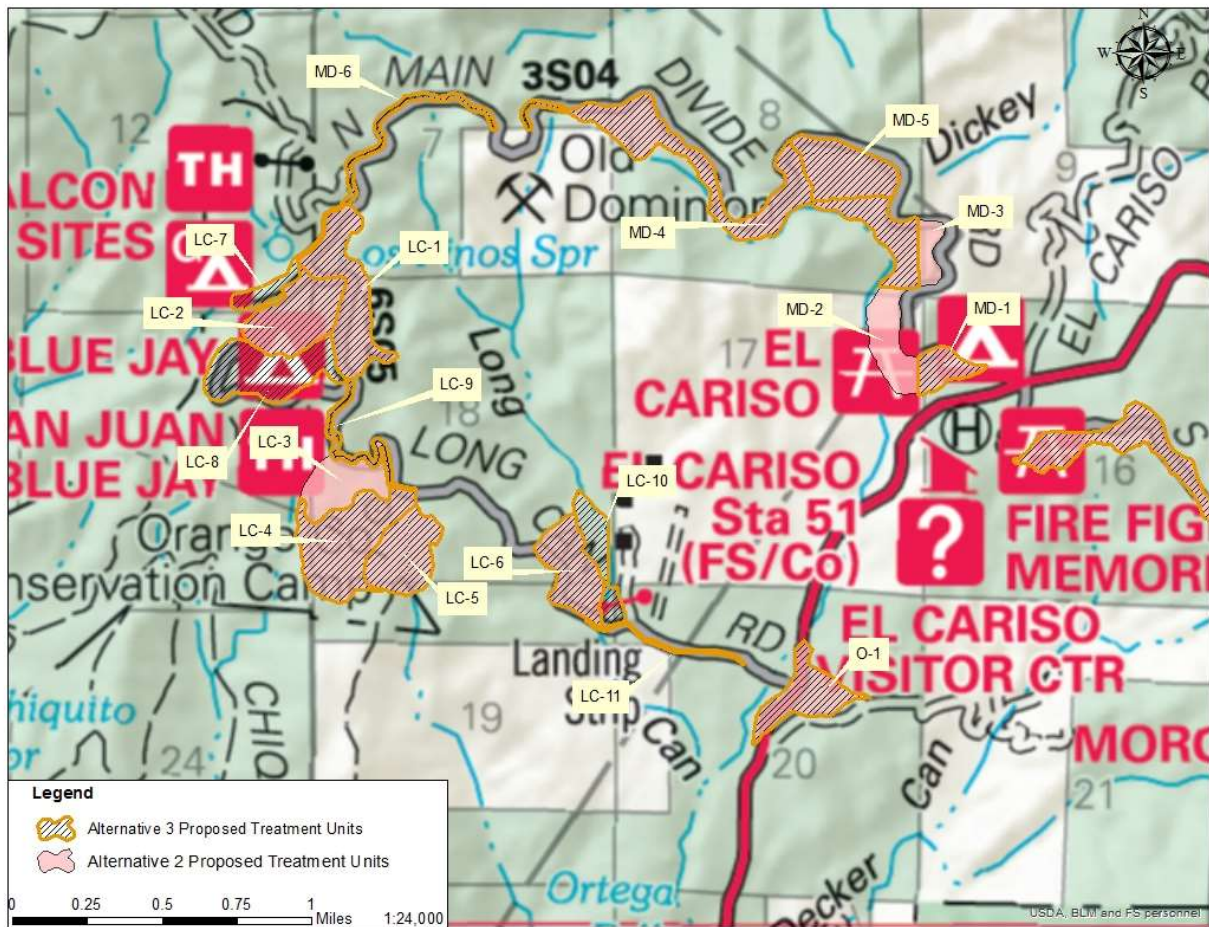
The South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso areas of the Trabuco Ranger District are among its most important priorities for community protection from wildfire. Communities that could be threatened by wildfire on this portion of the Cleveland National Forest include El Cariso Village, Rancho Capistrano, and Decker Canyon in the mountains, as well as, Lake Elsinore, Lakeland Village, Wildomar, and La Cresta at their base, putting public and firefighter safety at risk. Forest Service infrastructure could also be threatened, including the El Cariso, Blue Jay, and Falcon Campgrounds, the El Cariso Hotshots Camp, the Los Pinos Conservation Camp, the El Cariso Fire Station and Visitor Center, and permitted utilities and communication sites. The alignment of existing fuels, topography, and diurnal wind patterns increase the risk for a large wildland fire event which could have a detrimental effects to life, property, and improvements adjacent to the proposed project area. Fuels reduction activities as proposed would improve defensible space through direct community protection, provide for safe ingress/egress for public and emergency responders during future wildfire events, and increase the efficacy of fire suppression tactics along fuelbreaks, potentially limiting wildland fire size thus limiting loss of life and property.

## **2. Decision and Rationale**

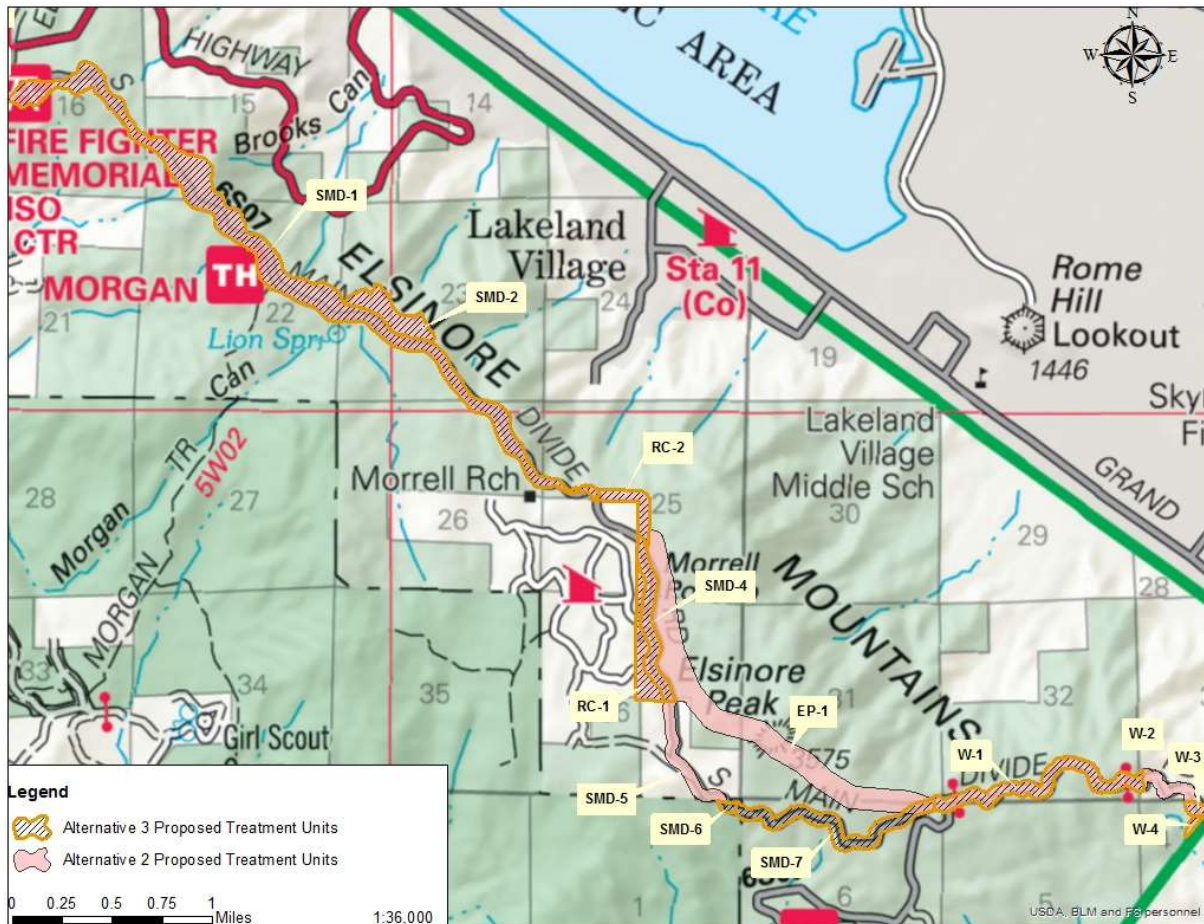
Based upon the analysis and evaluation documented in the South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management EA and associated record, comments received from interested parties, and direction from the Cleveland National Forest LMP, I have decided to implement the Alternative 3 (Strategic Placement of Fuelbreaks and Defense Zones on NFS lands while Limiting Impacts to Resources) in its entirety. Alternative 3 authorizes the implementation of hazardous fuels treatments on up to 855 acres of Cleveland National Forest lands including manual, mechanical, chemical, and prescribed fire treatment methods or any combination thereof. Additionally, Alternative 3 will avoid impacts to one federally-listed endangered and one federally-listed threatened plant species by not treating units (EP-1) included solely within the Alternative 2 project area. See detailed treatment matrix and project location maps (*Table 1, Figures 1-2*).

**Table 1. Treatment matrix for action Alternative 2 and Alternative 3.**

| South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Hazardous Fuels Management Project - Trabuco Ranger District, Cleveland National Forest, R5  |                      |                |                       |  |                              |               |                  |                  |                        |                       |                       |
|--|----------------------|----------------|-----------------------|--|------------------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Unit Number  | Unit Name            | Land Ownership | Existing Vegetation   | New Construction or Existing Fuelbreak | Mechanical Treatment Type    | Herbicide Use | Targeted Grazing | Prescribed Fire* | Maintenance Required** | Alternative 2 - Acres | Alternative 3 - Acres |
| EP-1   | Elsinore Peak FB     | FS             | Mixed - Oak Woodland, | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | N             | N                | Y                | Y                      | 160                   |                       |
| LC-1   | Falcon Meadow        | FS             | Mixed - Oak Woodland, | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile              | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 44                    | 44                    |
| LC-2   | Blue Jay Meadow      | FS             | Mixed - Oak Woodland, | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile              | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 38                    | 38                    |
| LC-3   | Los Pinos Camp North | FS             | Oak Woodlands         | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile              | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 28                    |                       |
| LC-4   | Los Pinos Camp       | FS             | Oak Woodlands         | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile              | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 53                    | 53                    |
| LC-5   | El Cariso HSC        | FS             | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 32                    | 32                    |
| LC-6   | El Cariso Village    | FS             | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 30                    | 30                    |
| LC-7   | Falcon Sites         | FS             | Oak Woodland          | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile              | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 9                     |
| LC-8   | Blue Jay CG          | FS             | Oak Woodland          | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile              | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 41                    |
| LC-9   | Long Canyon Rd West  | FS             | Mixed Oak Woodland,   | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 9                     |
| LC-10  | El Cariso Village    | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 18                    |
| LC-11  | Long Canyon South    | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 4                     |
| MD-1   | Main Divide Rd       | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 13                    | 13                    |
| MD-2   | Main Divide Rd       | NON FS         | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 25                    |                       |
| MD-3   | Main Divide Rd       | NON FS         | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 10                    |                       |
| MD-4   | Main Divide Rd       | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 83                    | 83                    |
| MD-5   | Main Divide Rd       | FS             | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 34                    | 34                    |
| MD-6   | Main Divide West     | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Chip      | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 14                    |
| O-1  | Junco Meadow         | FS             | Mixed - Oak Woodland, | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 27                    | 27                    |
| RC-1   | Rancho Capistrano    | FS             | Oak Woodland          | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 22                    | 22                    |
| RC-2   | Rancho Cap NE DZ     | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 16                    | 16                    |
| SMD-1  | South Main Divide Rd | FS             | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 202                   | 202                   |
| SMD-2  | South Main Divide Rd | FS             | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 29                    | 29                    |
| SMD-4  | South Main Divide Rd | FS             | Mixed - Oak Woodland, | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 31                    | 31                    |
| SMD-5  | South Main Divide Rd | NON FS         | Mixed - Oak Woodland, | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | N             | N                | Y                | Y                      | 24                    |                       |
| SMD-6  | South Main Divide Rd | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | N             | N                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 2                     |
| SMD-7  | South Main Divide Rd | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | N             | N                | Y                | Y                      |                       | 45                    |
| W-1  | Wildomar Rd          | FS             | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 49                    | 49                    |
| W-2  | Wildomar Rd          | NON FS         | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 14                    |                       |
| W-3  | Wildomar Rd          | FS             | Chaparral             | Existing                               | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 5                     | 5                     |
| W-4  | La Cresta            | FS             | Chaparral             | New                                    | Hand Cut + Pile or Masticate | Y             | Y                | Y                | Y                      | 3                     | 3                     |
| TOTAL  |                      |                |                       |  |                              |               |                  |                  |                        | 972                   | 855                   |
| * Pile burning or understory burning may be employed to meet fuels objectives. Y=Yes N=No = Unit not included in Alternative<br>** Maintenance may consist of mechanical treatment, prescribed burning, grazing, herbicide application, or any combination there in. |                      |                |                       |  |                              |               |                  |                  |                        |                       |                       |



**Figure 1.** Project areas delineating proposed treatment unit location between the two action alternatives north of the Ortega Highway (SR-74).



**Figure 2.** Project areas delineating proposed treatment unit location between the two action alternatives south of the Ortega Highway (SR-74).

### **Planned Activities within Alternative 3:**

- Initial entry into the mature chaparral vegetation would employ cut/pile/pile burn and/or mastication/broadcast burn treatments. Masticator work would be completed with either an excavator-mounted or rubber-tracked skid-steer mastication attachment.
- In general new fuelbreaks would receive treatments not to exceed 300 feet wide, typically adjacent to system roads. Existing fuelbreaks and defense zones, along roads and around Forest Service developed sites, would follow historical treatment boundaries that tend to have greater widths.
- Mechanical treatments would generally occur on slopes up to 35 percent. Under unusual circumstances, short pitches of up to 50 percent slope could be mechanically treated.

- With the exception of scrub oak, no oaks will be intentionally cut unless they are a hazard tree.<sup>1</sup>
- For initial mastication and hand cut treatments, 60 to 80 percent of the vegetation would be treated, leaving untreated islands of shrubs generally no greater than 0.25 acre in size. These islands would have undulating edges to provide a natural appearance. If possible, the retained islands would consist of differing plant species to maintain plant species diversity.
- If treatment units are masticated or chipped, the residual material would generally be three to five inches in depth and continuous over 25 percent of the treatment unit. A follow-up prescribed broadcast burn would occur only under specific conditions as specified in the design features.
- Obligate reseeding shrub species would be avoided for multiple treatment methods (e.g., mastication, cutting with chainsaws, and prescribed broadcast burning). These species in particular would be purposefully retained in untreated islands.
- Retained manzanita species would not be pruned during fuelbreak construction or maintenance. During prescribed fire treatments, active ignition would not occur within 15 feet of individual or groups of retained manzanita to limit impacts to the species.
- In prescribed burn treatments, the objective would be to treat 60 to 80 percent of the vegetation.
- Firelines would be constructed where natural barriers and roads do not exist to provide control locations for prescribed fire activities and to allow access for ground-based ignition and holding crews. These lines would be constructed by hand or by use of tracked or rubber-tired machinery with a blade no wider than 8 feet. A full range of aerial and ground based ignition equipment and firing patterns may be used to meet these objectives, but typically, ignition would be completed by hand (i.e., drip torches).
- Key areas of young coast live oaks would be avoided during all phases of implementation, including mastication and prescribed burning.
- In areas where conifers exist, thinning of individual trees would occur to reduce competition for limited resources, i.e. sun, water, soil nutrients, between residual trees and decrease crown continuity. Thinning would occur from below, generally removing suppressed and intermediate size classes.
- Pruning of live and dead branches of residual conifer trees would occur to raise the base canopy height and reduce probability of a surface fire transitioning into tree crowns.

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<sup>1</sup> A tree is considered hazardous (by the District's definition) if it has defects that may cause a failure resulting in property damage, personal injury or death. It must have a structural weakness and something to hit if it falls.

Residual trees would be pruned up to 12 feet in height or 1/3<sup>rd</sup> the height of the live crown on trees less than 15 feet in total height.

- Proposed treatments would begin with initial treatments and be followed by maintenance to ensure effectiveness and sustainability of fuelbreak objectives. Various treatment methods would be implemented or withheld, based on the results and successes of achieving objectives. Monitoring and data collection would be used throughout all project phases to guide decisions for treatment implementation.
- SMD-6, approximately 2 acres, is located in designated wilderness. The west portion of the fuelbreak extending off South Main Divide Road would be limited to mechanical treatments within 100 feet of the road shoulder. No other activities would take place outside the 100 foot buffer. To the east of the roads edge, treatments would occur within the full 150 foot buffer proposed.

#### **Initial Hazardous Fuels Treatment Activities:**

- Manually cut shrubs with chainsaws and pile activity slash by hand or machinery
- Alternatively, masticate the existing fuel bed using a tired or tracked machinery.
- Pile burn and/or broadcast burn the activity fuels.
- Apply Imazapyr (foliar applied) herbicide to the young sprouting woody vegetation to limit regrowth.

#### **Maintenance Hazardous Fuels Treatment Activities:**

Maintenance treatments would be considered as vegetative growth exceeds prescribed heights necessary for reduced fire behavior. It is expected that one or all of the initial prescribed treatments would be reintroduced in three to five years once initial suite of treatments has been completed.

In addition to the above treatments, fuelbreak maintenance may employ the use of targeted grazing two years after initial treatments are completed and could be repeated every two years. Grazing would not follow herbicide application in the same season.

***These project design features will mitigate resource impacts during implementation of Alternative 3:***

#### **2.4.1 General Wildlife**

- WLD-1     Avoid establishing staging areas within riparian areas.
- WLD-2     Whenever possible vegetation piled on site for later removal or burning should be treated as soon as possible after piling in order to minimize colonization by wildlife. Depending on the plant species, some of the cut vegetation could be used as vertical mulch to minimize illegal off-highway vehicle (OHV) activity.

## **2.4.2 Terrestrial Wildlife Species**

### ***Migratory Birds***

- TWS-1 Avoid adverse impacts to nesting birds per Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), by avoiding treatment activities during bird breeding season (March 15 to September 15) whenever practicable. If work is performed during the breeding season and the Forest biologist feels it is necessary, a walk through survey would be performed by a qualified biologist to identify obvious nests prior to undertaking work. If active nests are located, appropriate exclusionary buffers would be established.

## **2.4.3 Botany**

### ***Regional Forester's List of Sensitive Plant Species (Forest Service Sensitive)***

- BOT-1 Areas with known sensitive species would be excluded from herbicide and goat grazing treatments; sites would be flagged for avoidance
- BOT-2 Sensitive plants would be monitored where mechanical equipment use, mechanical and hand treatment, and burning overlap with known occurrences.
- BOT-3 Imazapyr would not be applied within 100-feet of sensitive plant species occurrences.
- BOT-4 Crews and equipment staging areas would be located at a minimum 50-feet from sensitive plant occurrences.
- BOT-5 Protection measures would be evaluated for, and extended to, any newly discovered occurrences or newly listed sensitive plant species.

## **2.4.4 Threatened, Endangered, and Candidate Species**

- TESP-1 To eliminate impacts to Munz's onion, no firelines would be constructed through critical and occupied habitat and no vehicles will be allowed to access the project through these areas or stage in these locations. No mechanical equipment use, mechanical and hand treatments, prescribed fire, herbicide treatments, or grazing would occur in critical and occupied habitat. These areas to be avoided would be flagged prior to project implementation.

## **2.4.5 Invasive Plant (Weed) Species**

- WEED-1 All off-road equipment used would be washed at a location away from potential habitats (for example, commercial car wash in developed area) before moving into the project area to ensure that the equipment is free of soil, seeds, vegetative material, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds of invasive plant species. "Off-road equipment" includes equipment, such as masticators and chippers; it does not include chip vans, service vehicles, water trucks, pickup trucks and similar vehicles not intended for off-road use. Equipment would be considered clean after six minutes of washing. Workers will be required to ensure footwear and pants are free of mud and seed before entering project site.

- WEED-2 A combination of natural barriers (e.g., rocks, logs, and vegetation), screening and fencing would be used, as required, to prevent/discourage illegal OHV activity and unauthorized recreation (i.e., user-created trail establishment) from occurring during and after the project treatment. Coordination with adjacent landowners, public education and signing would be used as appropriate.
- WEED-3 Staging areas for equipment, materials, or crews would be located in areas that have been previously disturbed or are degraded habitat. If treatment activities allow, mulched vegetation may be spread in staging areas after use to inhibit growth of non-native annual grasses.
- WEED-4 Before goats are brought in for targeted grazing within the project area, they would be held in quarantine, depending on the origin of the herd, until such time as any seeds from invasive species not already present in the project area would have passed through the intestinal tract of all animals in the herd.
- WEED-5 No mechanical or prescribed burning will be allowed in areas currently infested with Yellow starthistle.
- WEED-6 All occurrences of Spanish Broom and Tree Tobacco in the project footprint would be treated as part of project implementation and will receive herbicide treatment.
- WEED-7 All project areas need to be monitored for new occurrences of Yellow starthistle and other noxious weed species after implementation for three years.

#### **2.4.6 Heritage**

- HER-1 Identified cultural resources within the project area would be flagged for avoidance by a qualified archaeologist to include a buffer zone of approximately 10 meters around the outside of the boundary of each site. Potential ground disturbing activities prohibited within the buffer zone include use of masticators, targeted grazing, hand piling, and pile burning.
- HER-2 The possibility of unidentified cultural resources exists from gaps in survey coverage across the APE in conjunction with the inability to complete survey due to a combination of vegetation and topographic factors. Post treatment survey would be conducted under the discretion of the Heritage Program Manager where a high likelihood of significant cultural resources may exist.
- HER-3 At the discretion of the Heritage Program Manager (HPM), certain hazardous fuels treatments may be authorized within site boundaries as long as appropriate on-site historic protection measures are applied.

- HER-4 Ground disturbing activities conducted in the vicinity of areas to be flagged and avoided may also be periodically monitored by a qualified archaeologist during project implementation in order to ensure there are no inadvertent effects to historic properties and to enhance the effectiveness of protection measures. The results of any monitoring inspections shall be documented in cultural resources reports and submitted to the HPM.
- HER-5 Herbicide use would be excluded from areas identified as a priority for the propagation and harvesting of plant resources necessary for traditional practices.

#### **2.4.7 Watershed Health, Water Quality, and Soils**

- HYD-1 Areal extent of detrimental soil disturbance would not exceed 15 percent of the area dedicated to growing vegetation. Soil cover would be maintained at levels at least 50 percent of the soil surface in upland area and at least 71 percent in the Riparian Conservation Areas (RCA) (98 feet for intermittent streams and 50 feet for ephemeral streams). Soil cover would consist of rocks, litter, organic matter, low-growing plants, and woody debris.
- HYD-2 Mechanical equipment use (masticator) would require dry soil conditions during project implementation to prevent soil compaction, rutting, and disturbance.
- HYD-3 Mechanical equipment operations would be limited to slopes less than 35 percent.
- HYD-4 Mechanical treatment (hand crews using chainsaws is permitted) would be prohibited within 98 feet of intermittent channels while mechanical equipment would be permitted within 25 feet of ephemeral drainages. It is preferable that mechanical crossings of ephemeral drainages be limited and conducted perpendicular to the stream course.
- HYD-5 Targeted grazing would occur outside the primary storm season (December to March) and outside any wildlife related limited operating periods.
- HYD-6 Targeted grazing would not occur within 50 feet of intermittent channels and 25 feet of ephemeral drainages
- HYD-7 Water sources, supplements, and any other resources needed for grazing would be kept out of the RCA.
- HYD-8 Targeted grazing would not occur in units MD-4 or MD-5.
- HYD-9 Prescribed fire would be backed into the RCA. No broadcast burn ignitions would occur within RCAs.
- HYD-10 Hand piles would not be placed in or within 50 feet of an intermittent channel and 25 feet of an ephemeral channel.
- HYD-11 Hand piles would not exceed 15 percent of an area dedicated to growing vegetation.

- HYD-12 Firelines constructed for project implementation would be rehabilitated following project implementation (prescribed burn). Rehabilitation on the fireline includes: pulling back and spreading out berms, and spreading of bush and ground cover across the fireline. Firelines would be disguised from view as much as possible.
- HYD-13 Water bars or lead out ditches may be constructed in firelines to minimize erosion. Water bars or lead out ditches would be installed according to the following recommended minimum intervals.

**Table 2.** Recommended minimum interval guidelines for the installation of waters bars.

| Fireline Gradient<br>(% slope) | Distance Between Water-Bars |                      |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
|                                | (feet)                      | (chains)             |
| 0 to 5                         | no water-bars needed        | no water-bars needed |
| 6 to 15                        | 200                         | 3                    |
| 16 to 30                       | 100                         | 1.5                  |
| 31 to 49                       | 75                          | 1                    |
| > 50                           | 50                          | 0.5                  |

- HYD-14 Mechanical equipment refueling would occur outside of the RCA and would have spill containment measures in place during operations. For small quantities (5 gallons or less), fueling of gas-powered machinery would not occur within 25 feet of any body of water or stream channel to maintain water quality.

## 2.4.8 Herbicide

All herbicides would be used according to the design features listed below to minimize negative effects on soils, water, and non-target species.

- HERB-1 Herbicide would be Imazapyr-based herbicide (i.e. Habitat™) mixed with a methylated seed oil surfactant (MSO) and a marking dye. Herbicide would be mixed to label specifications for low volume foliar application using backpack sprayers.
- HERB-2 The Herbicide Transportation, Handling, and Emergency Spill response Plan and spill kit would be on-site when herbicide treatment occurs. The Plan would include reporting procedures, project safety planning, methods of clean-up of accidental spills, and information including a spill kit contents and location as noted in Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2150, Pesticide-Use Management and Coordination Handbook.
- HERB-3 Equipment used for transportation, storage, or application of herbicides would be maintained in a leak-proof condition.

- HERB-4 Herbicide containers would be secured and prevented from tipping during transport.
- HERB-5 To reduce the potential for spills, impervious material, such as a bucket or plastic, would be placed beneath mixing areas in such a manner as to contain any spills associated with mixing/refilling.
- HERB-6 Immediate control, containment, and cleanup of fluids and herbicides due to spills or equipment failure (broken hose, punctured tank, etc.) would be implemented. All contaminated materials would be disposed of promptly and properly to prevent contamination of the site. All hazardous spills would be reported immediately to the Forest hazardous Spill Coordinator.
- HERB-7 Application of herbicides would follow all local, state, and federal laws and regulations as they apply to pesticides and all label language for the herbicide would be followed.
- HERB-8 Herbicide usage would be limited to the minimum amount required to be effective.
- HERB-9 Unless prior approval is obtained from a Forest Service hydrologist or biologist; mixing and loading of herbicide(s) would take place a minimum of 150 feet from any body of water or stream channel. Herbicides would be colored with biodegradable dye to facilitate visual control of application.
- HERB-10 To avoid drift during application, herbicides would not be applied when wind velocities are greater than 5 miles per hour.
- HERB-11 No herbicide application would occur if precipitation is occurring or is imminent within 48 hours.
- HERB-12 Herbicide spray equipment would not be washed or rinsed within 150 feet of any body of water or stream channel. All herbicide containers and rinse water would be disposed of in a manner that would not cause contamination of waters.
- HERB-13 There would be no application of herbicides to surface waters or within 10 feet of streams.
- HERB-14 Herbicide treatments would not occur within a 100-foot buffer of sensitive plant species occurrences.
- HERB-15 No herbicide treatments would occur within twice the “dripline” (distance from edge of canopy to trunk) of any oak tree.

### 2.4.9 Forest Health

The following forest health practices would be observed to mitigate negative effect to residual groups or individual of tree:

- FH-1 All cut conifer stumps greater the 4 inches in diameter would be treated with a borax compound, such as Sporax™ or Cellu-treat™, within four hours of severing the bole from the stump to reduce the inoculation of cut stumps with Annosus root disease (*Heterobasidion annosum*). All other best management practices with borax compound application in a forested setting would be followed.
- FH-2 Slash treatments in pine would emphasize full removal to limit availability of green slash to Ips bark beetle infestations. When this practice is unfeasible or impracticable due to environmental constraints the following guidelines would be followed:
  - a. Treatments in coniferous forest settings would occur from August to December of any given year.
  - b. Slash piles or jackpots created through cutting of pine trees would be burned within one drying season or as soon as practical to limit brood material available for Ips bark beetle.
  - c. If burning of slash does not occur within one drying season, no further treatments would occur in that immediate area until existing slash is disposed of through prescribed fire or removal.

### 2.4.10 Visual Resources

The following design features would be observed to mitigate negative effect to the scenic integrity of the area:

- VIS-1 Locate burn piles away from leave trees to avoid crown burning in all areas and scatter burn pile remnants in areas visible from roads, recreation sites and special use facilities (e.g. campgrounds and trailheads, organizational camps, administrative sites etc.).
- VIS-2 Tree stumps generated from this project will be a maximum six-inch height. Tree stumps visible from the Ortega Highway, as well as, Forest System roads, and within recreation sites should be flush cut with the cut slanted away from the highway.
- VIS-3 In the chaparral vegetation type, masticated and broadcast burned treatment areas in WUI threat zones would have a non-linear pattern leaving scalloped or feather edges to provide a more natural appearance in the landscape.
- VIS-4 Chip, masticate, or remove all slash within 200 feet of the Ortega Highway.

### **2.4.11 Recreation**

The following design features would be observed to mitigate negative effect to recreational users of the area:

- REC-1 Prescribed broadcast and pile burning would be conducted during the low use recreation seasons. (This is typically outside the period from Memorial Day thru Labor Day weekend.) Use of heavy equipment and chain saws within 0.25 mile of developed recreation sites, recreation residences, special use permit holder facilities and private land facilities will also be limited to the low use recreation season and after 7:00 AM.
- REC-2 In order to reduce the risk of illegal off road vehicle activity from occurring, in prescribed fire treatment units, a visual barrier should be maintained where fire lines will be tied into roads or trails until immediately before operations. Fire lines will be rehabilitated as soon as possible after treatment.
- REC-3 Retain residual trees and brush in developed recreation sites where it provides important screening between units. Chipping is the preferred method of fuel treatment within developed sites. Prescribed broadcast burning or under burning would not be permitted within the designated developed recreation boundaries or within 150 feet outside a designated boundary.
- REC-4 Implement temporary closures on National Forest System roads, trails, developed recreation facilities and areas when needed for public safety to facilitate safe project implementation and where practical, provide alternative locations for camping and picnicking.

My decision to implement the Alternative 3 considered existing conditions, meeting the purpose and need for the project, environmental effects and public comments. My conclusion is based on a review of the record that shows a thorough analysis using the best available science. I also considered direction provided in the Forest Plan, environmental laws (e.g., Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act), and related regulations and policies. Based on information in the EA and record, I believe action Alternative 3 best meets the purpose of and need for action while minimizing adverse effects to the environment.

The key considerations I used in making my decision include the alternative's ability to meet the purpose and need for the project:

- Without fuels treatments in the South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Area, the potential for damage to occur during a wildland fire would be exacerbated since no areas of strategic vegetation reduction would be created. Additionally, emergency response personnel would find it difficult to implement fire management directions for direct control and perimeter control strategies during any normal; i.e. 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, fire weather/fuels conditions.
- Treatments proposed under Alternative 3 for new fuelbreaks will reduce fireline intensities, flame lengths, and decrease rates of spread, over the project area, while in areas of previous fuels treatments, treatment efficacy would be prolonged through reoccurring maintenance. Resultant flame lengths will be less than 4 feet and fireline intensities would be reduced to 100 BTUs or less. This will grant firefighters easier access through escape routes to safety zones and tactical options such as burning out would become viable.
- Alternative 3 will reduce risk to life and property adjacent to and near the project area. Post treatment conditions within the fuel break will allow for the use of safe, efficient fire suppression tactics and improved defensible space to safely engage in structure protection during a wildfire.
- The fuel bed modification that will take place under Alternative 3 will also greatly increase the effectiveness of aircraft suppression equipment. Water and retardant dropped wouldn't have to penetrate a brush canopy to be effective, and the new grass fuel bed would react more rapidly to the drops.
- Alternative 3 creates and maintains fuelbreaks and defense zones in the most strategic locations near infrastructure, improvements, and along roadways where firefighter access may be gained safely and efficiently while limiting impacts to biotic and abiotic resources.
- Alternative 3 has incorporated numerous design features to minimize, or avoid completely, adverse impacts to biotic/abiotic resources within the project area.

The South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management Project Environmental Analysis documents the analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

### **3. Other Alternatives Considered**

Alternative 1 is the “no action” alternative. No hazardous fuels reduction or vegetation maintenance activities will be implemented. Fuel loading, vegetation types, and current ecosystems will persist in their existing conditions. This alternative was considered in the decision but was not chosen. The “no action” alternative would not meet the purpose and need for the project.

Alternative 2, initially developed as the proposed action, included the existing fuelbreak system in need of maintenance and constructed new adjoining sections using a mix of strategic topographic locations, e.g. Elsinore Peak, and existing roads that would lie on National Forest System (NFS) lands, as well as, private lands.

Although analyzed in the EA, alternative 2 was not chosen for two reasons; 1) it would not have used the best available science which has shown creating defensible space away from existing roadways lowers the structures overall efficacy during a future wildland fire event by increasing response times for firefighters to access the fuelbreak, and 2) authorizing treatments on Elsinore Peak and adjacent private lands may have resulted in adverse impacts to federally-listed endangered Munz's onion and threatened threaded-leaf brodiaea individuals, as well as, occupied and designated critical habitats.

#### **4. Public Involvement**

On June 16, 2014, a letter soliciting interest for a pre-planning field trip was mailed to 164 potentially interested or affected agencies, organizations, and persons, as well as representatives from five Native American Tribes. On July 11, 2014, Forest Service representatives along with 10 attendees representing adjacent private landowners and the Pauma Band of Luiseno Indians visited proposed project areas to discuss purpose, need, methods, and extent of proposed treatments on the landscape.

This action was subsequently listed as a proposal on the Cleveland National Forest Schedule of Proposed Action (SOPA) in November 2014. No comments were received in response to the SOPA listing. A legal notice initiating a 30-day public scoping period was published in the San Diego Union Tribune on November 5, 2014. Additionally, a scoping letter containing a description and location of the proposed action was published online and sent to the same 164 potentially interested or affected agencies, organizations, and persons; including regional water quality control boards, state and regional fire protection districts, federal and state departments of fish and wildlife service, local resource conservation districts, The California Chaparral Institute, California Native Plant Society, Inter-Canyon League, Sierra Club, Audubon Society, and private land owners located adjacent to the project area. Two comment letters were received during public scoping.

Native American Tribal consultation was conducted in conjunction with the public scoping period. Eleven tribal representatives from five federally recognized tribes were scoped over the course of the 30-day period. Two comment letters were received during tribal consultation deferring any concerns of the project to tribes in closer proximity to the project area.

A legal notice initiating a 30-day comment period on the draft environmental analysis was published in the Orange County Register on March 23 and 24, 2017 and in the Riverside Press-Enterprise March 25, 2017. Additionally, a public comment period letter informing interested parties of the time line and chance to comment on the draft environmental analysis was published online and sent to the same 164 potentially interested or affected agencies, organizations, and persons as during the public scoping period. The letter contained a link to the draft environmental analysis online and contact information to find out more about the project and how comments may be received.

The Cleveland National Forest received seven comment letters within the 30-day time period initiated by the publication of the legal notice.

In addition to the Public comment periods, the Trabuco Ranger District held a subsequent field trip on July 20, 2017 in which all prior individuals and affected parties who had supplied timely comment to the project were invited. Of those invited, two organizations, the California Chaparral Institute and California Native Plant Society – Orange County Chapter, responded with interest and were in attendance on July 20<sup>th</sup>.

Forest Service responses to all comments can be found in Chapter 5 of the EAwW

### **5. Finding of No Significant Impact**

After considering the environmental impacts described in the EA and after examining supporting documentation found in the project record, I find that implementing the selected alternative will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, considering the context and intensity of impacts (see 40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. The finding of no significant impact is not biased by the beneficial impacts of the selected alternative. The beneficial effects consist of the improved preparedness for future wildland fire events that will result from the project.
2. No significant impacts on public safety will occur due to the implementation of the project. The project will instead improve public safety in the event of a wildland fire as compared to existing conditions. Smoke could have adverse effects to human health and safety, but implementation will comply with the Air Pollution Control District's permissive burn days, minimizing adverse effects. The potential health effects of herbicide use are addressed in depth in the South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management Project EA (Chapter 3.2), which found no significant impacts to health or safety in using herbicide as specified in project design features.
3. No significant impacts on the unique characteristics of the area will occur because no effects to cultural resources are expected (Chapter 3.4) given the design features that will be followed, and no other unique characteristics apply.
4. The impacts on the quality of the natural environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the effects of the project.
5. The Forest Service has considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. Analysis shows the impacts are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts because the purpose and need for the project will be addressed by the selected alternative, including maintenance.
7. The cumulative impacts associated with the selected alternative are not significant (see relevant cumulative effects sections in Chapter 3 of the EA). This EA analyzed the cumulative effects of this project in combination with activities on adjacent lands.
8. The action will have no significant adverse impact on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects either listed or eligible to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or on Tribes. A heritage resource and tribal relations specialist has surveyed the project area and

did not identify heritage resources that would be damaged or Tribes that would be adversely affected by the selected alternative (see section 3.4 of the EA).

9. The action will not have significant adverse effects on any endangered or threatened species, or habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. Project area surveys were conducted by a Forest Service wildlife biologist and botanist which identified two plant species of concern: 1) One federally-listed endangered plant species, Munz's onion, occurs solely within units included under action alternative 2, as well as, 18.8 acres of critical Habitat. 2) One federally-listed threatened plant species, thread-leaved brodiaea occurs solely within units included under action alternative 2. By choosing action alternative 3, treatment units where these species and critical habitat occur have been excluded from the project area which precludes the possibility of any significant adverse effects on these species or its habitat as a result of implementing the project (see section 3.3 of the EA).
10. The action will not violate federal, state, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the LMP (see section 1.8 of the EA).

## **6. Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations**

My decision to implement the selected alternative is consistent with the long-term goals and objectives listed in the LMP. The project was designed in conformance with LMP standards and guidelines.

### **6.1 National Forest Management Act of 1976, as amended**

All project activities fully comply with the LMP. This project incorporates all applicable LMP forest-wide standards, guidelines, and management area prescriptions, as they apply to the project area, and complies with LMP goals and objectives. All required interagency reviews and coordination have been accomplished and new or revised measures resulting from these reviews have been incorporated. The LMP complies with all resource integration and management requirements of 36 CFR 219.14 through 219.27. Application of LMP direction for the project ensures compliance at the project level. With the inclusion of LMP direction, this proposed project will move the existing condition of the project area toward its desired condition.

### **6.2 Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended**

The chosen action alternative will have no significant impacts on threatened and endangered species. The project area was surveyed for threatened and endangered species. One federally-listed endangered plant species, Munz's onion, and one federally-listed threatened plant species, thread-leaved brodiaea, occur solely in units included in Alternative 2. By choosing to implement Alternative 3, project treatments and activities completely avoid occupied habitat and designated critical habitat by not treating the fore mentioned units and therefore would not impact individuals, populations, or designated critical habitat that is contained within Alternative 2 treatment units and discussed in section 3.3 of the EA.

### **6.3 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended**

The action will have no significant adverse impact on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects either listed or eligible to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or on

Tribes. The project has been analyzed by a heritage resource and tribal relations specialist in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and no historic properties or heritage resources that would be of concern to Tribes would be adversely affected by the selected alternative (see section 3.4 of the EA).

#### **6.4 Federal Water Pollution Control Act (Clean Water Act) of 1972, as amended**

The design of project activities is in accordance with LMP standards and guidelines, best management practices, and applicable Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction. Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of LMP standards and guidelines and Best Management Practices will occur. Project activities are expected to meet applicable state water quality standards (see section 3.5 of the EA).

#### **6.5 Executive Order 11988, Clean Water**

This project is fully consistent with this executive order.

#### **6.6 Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species**

Implementation of the selected alternative is not anticipated to cause or promote the introduction or spread of invasive species. The selected alternative is designed to reduce the potential introduction and spread of invasive species. See section 2.4.5 and 3.3.4 of the EA.

#### **6.7 Executive Order 13186, Migratory Birds**

Management objectives of this executive order will be met. Minimal effects on migratory bird species are expected through the inclusion of a timing restriction that was incorporated into the proposed action to avoid nesting disturbance. See section 2.4.2 and 3.3.3 of the EA.

### **7. Administrative Review or Objection Opportunities**

This decision is subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218. A written objection, including attachments, must be postmarked or submitted within 45 days after the date that notice of this draft decision is published in *The Press-Enterprise*. Electronic objections in common formats (.doc, .rtf, .pdf, or .txt) may be submitted to: [objections-cleveland@fs.fed.us](mailto:objections-cleveland@fs.fed.us) with Subject: South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management. Objections may also be faxed to (858) 673-6192 to the attention of “OBJECTION: South Main Divide and Greater El Cariso Fuels Management,” sent by mail to the following address, or hand-delivered during normal business hours of 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays:

Forest Supervisor William Metz  
ATTN: Objections  
Cleveland National Forest  
10845 Rancho Bernardo Rd. #200  
San Diego, CA 92127

Persons or organizations who meet the requirements of 36 CFR 218.5 may object to this decision. Objections must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 218.8.

## **8. Implementation Date**

In accordance with 36 CFR 218.12, if no objection is received within the legal objection period, this decision may be signed and implemented on, but not before, the fifth business day following the close of the objection-filing period. If an objection is filed, this decision cannot be signed or implemented until the reviewing officer has responded in writing to all pending objections.

## **9. Contact**

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service objection process, contact:

Jacob Gipson, Fuels Battalion Chief  
Trabuco Ranger District  
1147 E 6<sup>th</sup> Street  
Corona, CA 92878  
Phone: (951) 736-1811

\_\_\_\_\_  
DARRELL W. VANCE  
District Ranger

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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